

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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EAR MEMBER,

I wish you a good Christmas. One hesitates to say a happy Christmas in the midst of such suffering and the seeming ascendancy of the powers of evil. But the more in such a situation is it possible for us to draw reassurance and strength from the event which we celebrate at Christmas. It is a plain fact of history that in the birth of Christ there entered into the process of human life a spiritual energy of unparalleled power. Into a corrupt society there came silently a new regenerating force greater than any other which history can show.

“The crazy stable, close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.”

It is an indisputable fact that in the spiritual life of mankind, as in nature, the death of winter can give place to the life of spring. The power which infused fresh vitality into the decaying ancient world is not yet exhausted. What has been may be again. Why should we preclude the possibility that our age should witness a repetition of the miracle?

MESSAGE FROM CHINA

A message has come from the heads of two of the leading Christian colleges in China. One of them is Francis C. Wei, the President of Hua Chung College, formerly at Wuchang in central China and now moved to Yunnan, whom many of you probably know. This message, coming to us across half the world from a country which has been exposed not for three months, but for nearly three years, to the horrors of war, is an encouraging reminder of the reality and strength of the fellowship which had its origin in the birth which we are celebrating at this time. The message is as follows:

“With the approach of the Christmas season our thoughts go round the world to our friends in other lands, many of whom may be going through the same trying experience as we in China. We all share the feeling that this sin-sick and war-torn world is drifting in a direction quite contrary to the Christmas message of peace and good will. But we are confident that these experiences will serve ultimately to bind us closer together in Christian fellowship and in our common determination to find a more effective expression of the spirit of Christ in the life of nations as well as of individuals. We pray that the work in our Colleges, in which you all share, may have its part in the world effort to make this Christmas the beginning of a new realisation of the meaning of Immanuel, ‘God with us.’”

OPPORTUNITIES OF WAR-TIME

I had a letter a few days ago from one of our collaborators, who writes: "W... brings a period when immense social changes can be brought about almost unnoticed. . . . No one can doubt that the real possibilities of the present situation are these possibilities of social reconstruction. If we take thought now we can, believe, remove mountains, and this ought to be not simply something that is planned for the end of the war, but something that we begin on, here and now." The new agreement between Britain and France in the field of finance, which was announced last week, is an illustration of the rapidity with which, under the pressure of war, things can come about that would be almost unthinkable in times of peace.

You will remember, perhaps, that the same note was struck by Dr. Helen Simpson in a recent broadcast talk, in which she began with a reference to a plan of Sir Christopher Wren for building a new London after the Great Fire of 1666. That fire had ruined London, but Wren saw a chance beyond the disaster. "The narrow old streets, the verminous houses, the filthy accumulations of five hundred years had been brought to ashes. What a chance to start fresh! He set to work to design the new London might have been—ought now to be."

That chance was lost. Shall we take ours?

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

P.S.—I would like to draw your attention to a letter to Christians in belligerent countries from the Primates of the Scandinavian Churches and a representative of the Finnish Church which you will find in the religious press this week.

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IS THIS HE THAT SHOULD COME?

"At this Christmas season of peace and goodwill it seems strange and ironical,"
So all the war-time sermons begin.

But when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, the season was not, in fact, conspicuous for either of the virtues now associated with it. He was not born into a Christmas card full of holly and robins and well-behaved citizens going tidily to church, but into the Roman province of Palestine, racked by the remembrance of civil wars, the expectation of revolt and the furious conflict of religious and political ideologies, and only held together forcibly in a precarious thirty years' peace by the unscrupulous old savage of genius who was already dying on a usurped and bloodstained throne. Nor, we may imagine, was the inn itself filled with a particularly well-willing and peaceful atmosphere, since it was crowded with people who had been disturbed from their homes and business to go and fill up census-papers—conditions liable to produce irritation of spirit at the best of times.

Our habitual way of keeping Christmas rather tends to push these realities out of sight. It is the Children's Feast, celebrated by angels and wise men, simple shepherds and the mild ox and ass. But, however refreshing it may be to think of it so, we are not wise in allowing ourselves to imagine that the peace and goodwill were of an exterior and established kind. They were born, weak and speechless—*Verbum infans*—into a noisy and hostile world. The Church (which has singularly few illusions about reality) has pointedly chosen Christmas week to celebrate the martyrdom of youth, conscious and unconscious, the willing soldier of Christ and the—so to call them—civilian casualties: St. Stephen and The Innocents.

So, too, many people prefer to think that the birth of the Word was accomplished with a miraculous gentleness, after no human fashion:

He came al so still
Where Hys moder was
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.

But here, again, reverence perhaps outruns theology. The Body that died by wood, and iron was no phantasm, and was the same Body that was born. It is consistent to suppose that the meek and terrible Lamb came as He went, with pain and crying and the violent rending of the corporal veil.

The desire to think prettily and peacefully about Christmas is natural and laudable, so long as it does not mislead men's minds about the nature of the Personality that was launched upon the world with so strange an accompaniment of heavenly splendour and earthly indignity. It was humble and hopeful, but by no means vague or wistful in the popular style of religious sentiment. When the Word learned to speak with words, It did not confine Itself to "comfortable words"; some

of the things It said would make strange mottoes for Christmas cards. The pious are singularly reluctant, on the whole, to allow to the Perfect Man all the human perfections that He displayed in His brief public career. Holy, meek, long-suffering, pitiful, simple, powerful, calm, dignified, lofty—these adjectives they concede Him; but they seldom venture to call Him bold, shrewd, witty, humorous, complex, vigorous, intelligent or subtle—though these qualities are conspicuous in His behaviour and conversation.

We are good at finding polite terms with which to smooth over disconcerting facts: “stern denunciations of hypocrisy” is a well-sounding phrase that wrings the withers of nobody; but if anybody except Christ had addressed a respectable body of influential citizens as a “generation of vipers,” we should probably have found a rougher name for his language. It is a pulpit commonplace to speak of the parables as “models of exquisite simplicity”; so they are, as far as vocabulary and dramatic presentation go; but who has ever been able to crystallize into a neat slogan the intellectual content of the stories about the Unjust Steward, the Labourers in the Vineyard, or even Dives and Lazarus?

Nor is the ruthless ridicule meted out to hecklers who ask imbecile questions ever praised as it should be for its quick-witted, and indeed lighthearted, ingenuity. (How well one knows that question about the woman with seven husbands! It is of the kind propounded by bright undergraduates at public meetings, and is intended to make the lecturer look a fool. It is dealt with by placidly pointing out that it is meaningless and by following it up with one or two counter-propositions conceived on the same lines. After which—the joke having somehow taken an unexpected direction—“there are no further questions.”) It should cause us to revise our ideas about the pacific solution of difficulties when we consider that the Peace which descended upon the world at Christmas did so, not in the shape of a treaty or a scheme of ethics, but in that of an energetic and formidable Personality.

Formidable and also complex. It was, I believe, Savonarola who pointed out that the devil was always as plain and straightforward as any person of common-sense could wish: it was God who was persistently complicated and paradoxical. The modern habit (so much deprecated by Dr. L. P. Jacks) of looking upon life as a series of “problems,” for each of which some neat and satisfying solution may be discovered, as for a detective-story, is evidence, perhaps, of a certain tendency on our part to devil-worship, or at least to the practice of art magic.

We are always looking for a formula which will settle everything permanently and relieve us from further exertion. “Lo, here,” we say, “is panacea, the universal remedy”; or “lo, there is Abracadabra, that word of power.” But the Word of power, when It lived and spoke, was not in the least like Abracadabra, which *looks* unintelligible, but conjures away difficulties with an attractive and sweeping simplicity. Nothing could have looked simpler than the Babe of Bethlehem or the Carpenter of Nazareth, and nothing could sound simpler than some of His sayings taken separately; the complexity comes when sayings and personality are considered as a living whole.

It is for this reason, presumably, that there are so many fashions in the representation of Christ. There is, for example, “Gentle Jesus”—a figure upon whose rather weak and effeminate lips it is difficult to imagine those thunderous denunciations, those warnings against hell-fire, those fierce eschatological prophecies which the artist appears, for the time being, to have conveniently overlooked. There is the “Man of Sorrows,”

whose harsh and furrowed features can never, one would suppose, have smiled at little children, looked graciously at St. Mary of the ointment, or softened into mirth over the preposterous images of camels going through the eyes of needles and being swallowed like pills, and who would assuredly have cast a paralysing gloom over the wedding-party at Cana. There is a Socialist Christ, with the poorest opinion of rich men in this world and the next, and who would, if he were consistent, have stigmatised Zacchaeus' offering of ten shillings in the pound as a half measure and framed the parable of the Labourers in better accordance with strict trade union principles. There is the contemplative, other-worldly, lily-of-the-field dreamer, from whom, as depicted, one would scarcely expect practical carpentering, let alone brisk and reasonable instructions about imperial taxation and the laudable efficiency of the friends of mammon. The fashionable Christ of the moment sits immovably on the mount of the Beatitudes, and is seldom heard to utter those confusing and startling statements about fire in the earth, swords, and the hatred of life for life's sake that were spoken at other times and in other places.

The complete Christ defies measurement and confounds the categories ; as fast as we confine Him in one pigeon-hole He walks serenely out of it into another. In one breath He calls upon us to love our enemies, and to hate father, mother and brethren for His sake ; at one moment He is meek and lowly, at another He proclaims Himself with an arrogance unexampled in history ; now He is silent and answers never a word, and now He breaks out into a spate of vehement rhetoric ; He is by turns harsh and pitiful, simple and subtle, plain-spoken and obscure, endlessly patient and fiercely impatient ; there is no accounting for what He may say or do next ; of all men of genius He is the most unpredictable.

Here and there we may grasp at something that seems to be clear and permanent : a constant charity for the warm-hearted sins and a sustained dislike of cold sloth, envy, avarice and pride ; a determination to value generosity of spirit in all its manifestations ; an unfailing courage of that more extreme and highly-strung sort that goes with a sensitive imagination ; a sort of absorbed intensity in everything said or done, so that whether He is praying or healing the sick, preaching or meditating, weeping, suffering or sleeping through a tempest, all is done with an astonishing thoroughness and self-abandonment. We note also that, while his most intemperate language was directed against oppression and hypocrisy, the only thing that provoked Him to physical violence was a dirty commercialism sheltering under the roof of religion. But we see Him only in swift, startling flashes, like fire from a cloud, that lights up a whole landscape, but blinds us to itself.

Yet with all this, the character, as a whole, is a complete and recognisable Personality. Nothing He ever said could possibly be mistaken for the words of anybody else. It is precisely the paradox and the contradiction that make us certain that the records are records of a real person. No writer of fiction, not even the writer of *Hamlet*, could ever have fabricated a character so individual in its diversity. The writer of fiction is, very properly, restrained by respect for the probable ; but Christ was the improbable-possible in person—the most improbable character that ever walked the world—as improbable as life itself. Nothing is more pathetic than the efforts of fiction-writers to reduce Him to probability ; one after another, they succeed only in depicting the impossible. In leaving out the unlikely they leave out the life ; their anxious explanations explain away themselves and each other. "But Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went His way." Easily.

And this, as St. John points out, was Incarnate Reason; a proposition violently resented, then and now, by people with timid notions about the intellect. This also as the Christmas season bids us take notice, was Incarnate Peace: an identification more readily acceptable when the Subject of it is harmlessly wrapped in swaddling bands than when It is going dynamically about the world hurling hard words at rulers and financiers, upsetting shop-counters, riding rough-shod over Sunday observance and announcing in emphatic accents that economic considerations are of no importance one way or the other.

Peace would (one feels) be more manageable if at least It would consent to lead a political faction or do something concrete and conclusive. Will It perhaps, restore the kingdom to Israel? No, It seems disinclined to pronounce in favour of any particular nation. Will It, then, forbid payment of tribute to the Empire, and so countenance a social revolution? On the contrary, It will pay the taxes Itself, and refuses to be interested in the machinery of government. Suppose we take It, willy-nilly, and make It king, and so impose Peace by force? But It does not seem to like that suggestion at all, and promptly disappears into a mountain alone. There seems to be no pleasing It. Will It at any rate stay quietly in the wilderness and cease to trouble us? It will not do that either. What, then, does It want? Is there anything It will consent to do? Certainly there is. It will have us recognise the things that belong to our peace; if not, It will go up to Jerusalem and be crucified.

That is not our idea of Peace at all? Well, no. Perhaps we have been misled by the Christmas card. *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*—but the Peace is not in the night, it is not in the quiet stars, it is not in the pastoral landscape with the sheep; it is not in the inn, least of all is it in the scroll which the two trim angels are holding out like a schedule: *Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. The Peace is not without, but within; not established but born; not static but dynamic; It is something alive—and It is very little. It needs to be nourished and tended; for if we leave It to look after Itself, It will die. When It grows to full stature, It will be strange, unexpected, energetic, and demanding; It will exact the service of our whole souls and bodies and if we fail to understand what It wants, It will have to die again, in tears and blood and a horror of great darkness.

This it is that the grave cannot hold. This it is that shall rise and live and come again in judgment. *Etiam venio cito. Amen. Veni, Domine Jesu.*

DOROTHY L. SAYERS

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